

Guidelines for Success: Sourcing Local Foods Through a Distribution Company

Offering locally grown foods is a great way to enhance your meals, while supporting the local economy. What's more, many food service operators report that meal participation increases as a result of serving local foods.

Whether you're launching a local foods program or just want to begin purchasing a few local foods, here are a few guidelines to keep in mind as you choose your vendor for next year (or work with your existing vendor).

Guidelines

Decide what buying "local" means for your institution. Local can mean grown within 30 miles, grown in Massachusetts, or grown right in town. Legislation supports your purchasing of Massachusetts grown product.*

Set goals for the amount of locally grown food you wish to serve to your clients on a yearly basis. You can specify that you want to purchase local food "whenever available," require that an annual percentage of total food provided be from local sources, or have the option of when you choose it. You can even write "preferential purchasing of locally grown foods" language into your bid specifications. Put your goals in writing and include them in your requests for proposals (RFPs).

Sample RFP language

It is the goal of [your institution] to utilize locally grown products and small family farms to the fullest extent possible. The Vendor, in their proposal, is asked to list the Massachusetts farmers and their products that the Vendor purchases and sells to its customers. [Your institution] is also asking the Vendor for their assistance in helping to identify these products at the time of purchase by [your institution] so that we may identify them as "locally grown" for our customers. [Your institution] is also committed to supporting those farmers who engage in sustainable and earth-friendly practices such as regulated pesticide use, integrated pest management, organic farming principles, and/or preservation of local indigenous or heirloom varieties. [Your institution] will reserve the right to utilize secondary vendors or suppliers if [your institution] determines that doing so would be in [your institution]'s best interest in order to accomplish these goals.

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Talk to vendors about what you want. With the new Massachusetts legislation supporting preferential purchasing for local foods*, your vendor can expand their business by helping you purchase locally through them. If your existing vendor doesn't already buy from local farmers, they may be willing to start to keep from losing your account.

Be sure to require your vendor to give you an annual accounting of locally grown foods that are sold to you--by product, by weight or in dollars, or all three—and specific information about where the products are from, so you know that you're meeting your goals.

Here are some questions to ask when choosing your vendor:

- ✦ Are locally grown items highlighted on the product availability lists?
- ✦ Are all of the local product notations on order sheets updated on a timely basis?
- ✦ Does your distribution company put specific farm names next to products on their list?
- ✦ Can you request items from specific farms when you order?
- ✦ When locally grown foods arrive at your loading dock, are the boxes or bags clearly labeled with the farm of origin?
- ✦ Can you order products from your distributor, but get them delivered directly from the local farm, rather than being shipped to the central warehouse first?

Ensuring that the items that you're receiving are actually the local foods you want is easy, if your distributor provides you with the right information. This is called **“local food transparency.”** When your distributor is able to inform you which farms are providing your products, you can add the information to your menus and signage and share it with your staff and customers. Just seeing the name of the farm makes food sound tastier and more nutritious!

* To learn more, go to www.mass.gov/agr/markets/Farm_to_school/docs/farm_to_school_legislation.pdf

For questions or assistance, please contact:

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